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The First Commandment

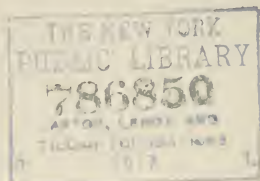
By
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*“Thou shalt have no other gods
before me.”*

The First Commandment

I

“**T**HOU shalt have no other gods before me,” reads the first of the commandments brought down from Sinai. The fact that it stands first would indicate that it is the most important of the ten, and the same conclusion is reached if we compare it with the other nine. But in presenting a proposition of such great importance it is well to support it with the best possible authority. In this case we are able to invoke the testimony given by One

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“who spake as never man spake.” In the twenty-second chapter of Matthew, beginning at the thirty-fifth verse, you will find the question asked and answered. “Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law?”

You will notice that the question was asked by a lawyer and that the lawyer asked it for the purpose of tempting Christ. It is not the first time, nor the last, that a lawyer has set a trap in vain; and it is not the only time a lawyer has done good without intending it.

In saying this I do not mean to reflect upon lawyers; I simply state the fact. There is a popular prejudice against lawyers. I found it necessary to leave out of one of my lectures a compli-

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mentary mention of lawyers because it made the audience laugh during a serious part of the address. Finding that I was compelled to insist each time upon the sincerity of the compliment, I finally omitted it. I do not share this feeling. My father was a lawyer and no better man ever lived. My ambition to be a lawyer was formed so early that I cannot remember when I began to look forward to a career in this profession. I studied law, was admitted to the bar and practiced until I was drawn away from law into politics, and my only son is a lawyer. I am thus thrice bound to respect the profession. With this disclaimer of prejudice I repeat that the lawyer selected by the Pharisees to embarrass the Saviour was not the first or only one to fail in such an attempt, and

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he was not the only one who, by addressing an improper question to the Saviour, brought out a great truth.

You will remember that the question was raised as to which of the disciples would be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. We are ashamed to think that those in the very presence of the Master could have thought of anything so selfish, and yet we are glad that the question was asked because it gave Christ an opportunity to announce the most revolutionary doctrine that this world has ever heard.

Man had been prone to measure his greatness by *the services which he could command from others*, but Christ taught that greatness is to be measured by *the service rendered to others*. This is the growing philosophy. The progress of nations, like the progress of individ-

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uals, can be measured by the extent to which this doctrine is applied in life.

In like manner, Christ's answer to the lawyer sets the seal of his approval upon the first commandment and establishes a great truth. In verses thirty-seven to forty, Jesus said unto him, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Some have put the emphasis upon humanity as if the second commandment were more important than the first. I remember that Tolstoi called attention to this error during the day which it was my privilege to spend with him at his

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Russian home. He insisted that the first commandment was the most important because man cannot understand his relation to his brother until he is first brought into harmony with the Heavenly Father.

Christ takes the ten commandments and condenses them into two. Out of the commandments that relate to man's duty to God He brings forth the one supreme commandment that includes all the others, namely, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." And out of the commandments that relate to man's duty to his fellow men He brings forth a second commandment worthy to be a companion to the first, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

Here is the whole law—all that man needs to understand his duty towards

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God and his duty towards his brother, but the first is the *great* commandment.

My purpose in calling your attention to this commandment is to show you that it is as much needed to-day as when it was given to the Children of Israel although our temptations are quite different from those which they had to meet. When the first commandment was announced its immediate purpose seems to have been to warn a chosen people against the worship of idols: to-day it comes to us with equal force as a warning against the worship of false gods which man is tempted to put between himself and Jehovah in this age.

I desire to bring before you nine of these false gods; not all the false gods, by any means, but nine that are representative. I might carry with me a little

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cabinet with three shelves and exhibit these gods before you in so far as they could be represented to the eye—three on the top shelf, three on the middle shelf, and three on the bottom shelf. But it may be better not to exhibit them. You might pick out your own false god, if you have any, and proceed to think of it while I talked about the others. It may be better to introduce them to you one at a time, and I will ask you to consider each of these false gods as I present it and then, when I am through with it, go on with me to the next.

I have arranged them in three classes because they are of different grades. I put three in the first class because, in the worship of them, good is sometimes done incidentally, even if unintentionally. The three in the second class are not of so

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high an order; those who worship these three do no good even unintentionally. In the third class I put three of a still lower order, three the worship of which destroys.

II

THE first of the gods in the first class is the God of Gold; its patrons worship money. It is put in the first class because those who worship money are generally industrious, and their industry sometimes brings substantial benefit to the world. Those who worship money may be intelligent also: a man may secure an education with no higher purpose than the making of money, and his intelligence may incidentally aid others. It is difficult if not impossible for one to monopolize the results of his industry or intelligence. Then, too, the worshippers of money may be wise enough to know that in-

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tegrity is an aid to accumulation, and their integrity may indirectly benefit society.

But the God of Gold is a false god and is sure to lead one astray. The worship of it shrivels the soul and, in the end, the love of money is quite sure to make man ignore the distinction between right and wrong and lead him to the employment of methods which are indefensible before the bar of conscience, even if they do not actually violate statute law.

The second god in the first class is the God of Fashion: it is worshipped by those who put social prominence above all other things. Its worship, too, may incidentally bring good to society. Man is a social creature: he needs to mingle with his fellows, but it is a false god and it leads to the putting of undue emphasis

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upon the social side of life and often creates unreasonable distinctions. This god leads those who worship it to neglect the higher and more important things of life.

The third god in the first class is the God of Fame. The statesman's god, or if you prefer it, the politician's god. I put this god in the first class because its worshippers, also, often render a service to society without intending it. The candidate for office is frequently an object for criticism, but how would we keep the man in office under control but for the men who are seeking offices? It is well for society that there are those ready and anxious to hold office. Their very eagerness and watchfulness add to the security of the public.

And then, too, the man who is looking

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for an office is willing to work. When told that this man or that man has his eye on an office—my answer is : do not disturb him. As long as he is looking for an office he will be untiring in his industry and we need his aid. It requires an enormous amount of time and labour to secure any great reform. I do not know what we would do for workers if it were not for men with aspirations. So many citizens, actuated by selfish reasons, do nothing, that their indifference must be offset for the present by the activities of some who are prompted by selfish ambition. And, in a country like ours, the intelligent man may learn that honest service rendered to the people is the surest road to preferment, and so may conscientiously endeavour to give expression to the will of the people,

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even though his motives are purely selfish.

But the God of Fame is a false god and one who has no higher purpose than love of fame is certain to be led astray. He will in time become so absorbed in worship of this god that he will resort to cunning, corruption or even fraud to secure position.

These are the gods of the first class. Any one of them might furnish us a theme for an evening but I can only spare a moment for each, leaving you to elaborate the suggestions made. Any incidental good that may come to society from the worship of any of these gods will come in larger measure from the worship of the true God.

III

AND now let us consider the three gods on the second shelf, the gods whose worship makes one worthless to himself and to society. They are of a lower order than the three gods already named because those who worship them do not render a service even unintentionally.

The first of the second three is the God of Ease—the god worshipped by those who are devoted to the body and desire nothing higher than comfort. They want food and clothing and shelter and ask to be let alone while they enjoy them. They eat, not because it is necessary to the body but because they like to

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eat. They sleep, not because the body needs rest and recuperation but because they like to sleep. They eat and eat and eat; they sleep and sleep and sleep: and then they rise to eat and eat again. They are worthless to themselves and worthless to society. They are the barren fig tree; they encumber the earth; they attach themselves to nothing good while they live and they pass away without giving a pang of pain.

The second god in the second class is the God of Intellect, the god worshipped by those who exalt the mind—who think, not with a purpose but merely for the pleasure of thinking. I know that in putting the Intellectual God upon the same level with the God of Ease I shall meet with some dissent, but it is so long since I have said anything which met

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with everybody's approval that a little opposition does not embarrass me. While the mind performs a higher function than the body, still those who worship the mind disobey the first commandment as surely as those who worship the body. The mind is the servant of man just as the body is the servant. Would you have proof of it? There is something in man that is superior to both body and mind—it is the soul of man that is supreme. That which can hold the body in the flames until the flames consume the quivering flesh is the real master, and the soul can do this. The soul can do even more, it can take the mind and purge it of its vanity and egotism, fill it with humility and make it the servant of mankind; the soul that can do this is master of the mind.

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There are intellectual temptations as well as physical temptations. It is the mind that disputes with the heart sovereignty over the individual, and it is death to faith and hope and life when the brain triumphs over the spiritual in man. The struggle between the mind and the heart began in the Garden of Eden—it still continues and real success hangs upon the issue. Pascal declares that the heart has its reasons which the mind cannot understand because the heart is of an infinitely higher order. History proves that the intellect cannot be relied upon to regenerate the life or to strengthen one to withstand the temptations which destroy. The Intellectual God is a false god and it is leading multitudes astray—multitudes who in the worship of their minds forget God and refuse to admit

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that there is in the universe anything higher than their own puny selves.

Sixth among the false gods—the third in the second class, is the Travel God, the god worshipped by those who wander to and fro in search of something new. I would not underrate the value of travel when one travels with a purpose. I can testify that one can learn more in a day by visiting a country than he can learn in many years by reading. One day in Japan or China or India is worth more than many books. You can learn more about idolatry in one hour upon the Ganges than you gather in a lifetime from returning missionaries.

And you never know when you start on a trip what will most impress you. When I visited Europe for the first time I had in mind a visit to the Tomb of

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Napoleon, and, remembering that Ingersoll had described in beautiful words the impression which a similar visit made upon him, I secured a book containing what he said. I intended to quote from Ingersoll in writing about the tomb but when I visited it myself I saw something which Ingersoll did not see, or which, if he saw it, did not impress him. It was a picture of Christ upon the cross in a stained glass window just beyond and above the sarcophagus "In which rest the ashes of this restless man." I do not know whether it was by accident or design that this god of war thus sleeps at the feet of the Prince of Peace, but to me it symbolized the victory of love over force, the final triumph of that philosophy which finds happiness as well as greatness in doing good.

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But while nothing is more instructive than travelling with a purpose, nothing is more unprofitable than travelling simply to say that you saw the interesting places of the earth. Such travelling is not only worthless but really harmful because such a traveller is apt to become dissatisfied with the commonplace things that make up every-day life.

IV

BUT while these three gods make life worthless, they are of a higher order than the last three to which I invite your attention. The three on the third shelf are degrading. The first of these is the God of Chance, the gambler's god. Those who worship this god soon find themselves unfit for the ordinary work of life because they are not satisfied with legitimate accumulations. When one sets his heart upon getting rich by the turn of a card or by the whirl of a wheel of fortune he rejects God's law of rewards. There is a divine law of rewards. When God gave us the earth with its fertile soil, the sunshine with its

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warmth, and the rains with their moisture, He proclaimed as clearly as if His voice had issued from the clouds, "Go work, and in proportion to your industry and intelligence so shall be your reward." This is God's law of rewards and it must prevail except where cunning evades it, government suspends it or force overthrows it. I am not sure but that it is harder to reform a confirmed gambler than a confirmed drunkard, for while drink diseases the body, gambling rots the moral fiber of the man.

The next false god is the God of Passion, the god whose worship turns human beings into beasts and robs man of the likeness of the God in Whose image he was made.

The last of the nine false gods is the Rum God—the God of Drink. Do you

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know what the worship of this god costs this country to-day? Something like two billion and a half per year. And what does it do for man? It silences every noble impulse and deadens every humane instinct. The worship of this god leads the boy to forget the mother who brought him into the world ; it leads the husband to break the vows which he made to his wife at the altar ; it converts the father into a brute and makes his children flee when they hear his returning footfall. It robs man of his patriotism ; he sits in a drunken stupor, indifferent to his country's peril. In this Christian land five times as much is spent on alcohol as is spent in the worship of Jehovah, and three times as much as is spent on education !

V

AND now, having exhibited before you each for a moment, these nine representative false gods, I remind you that they are but one. What I have shown you are but the masks of the one false god worshipped to-day—*self*. If we worship gold or fashion or fame it is for self ; if we worship ease, or intellect or travel it is for self. And it is self that we worship if we worship the God of Chance, the God of Passion or the God of Drink. To us, therefore, the commandment means, thou shalt not put thyself before God : thou shalt not, in thy love of self, forget the God who planned the universe, who created the world and who rules over man's destiny.

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I am not a theologian ; in fact, I have very little knowledge of the theological distinctions that separate the churches, and my family connections are such that I would not dare to lay much emphasis upon church lines. But I yield to none in my devotion in the fundamentals of Christianity which underlie all the churches.

While I am not versed in theology I venture to give a definition of conversion. Conversion, as I understand it, is surrender of one's self to God—obedience to the first commandment. It is putting the kingdom of God and His righteousness first. And how long does it take to be converted? Not longer, I rejoice to believe, than it does to reject God. It does not take longer to be converted to righteousness than to be

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converted to sin. It takes but an instant for an honest man to be converted into a thief—just the instant in which he decides to steal. It takes just an instant for a law-abiding man to become a murderer. And so it takes but an instant for the heart to surrender itself to its Maker and pledge obedience to God. A man may spend weeks weighing the question before deciding to steal, but the decision to steal is made in a moment; a man may harbour revenge for months and brood over a real or imagined wrong, but the decision is made in a moment. And so a man may consider for years whether he will change his course, but it takes but a moment to resolve, "I will arise and go to my father."

VI

AND may I venture again into the realm of theology far enough to state one effect of Christ's coming? I shall not attempt an elaborate explanation of the theory of atonement, but I believe I know what Christ can do for man, when He takes hold of a human life and brings that life into harmony with God.

To me a spring is the most fascinating fact in nature. It is the best representation of the ideal life, just as the stagnant pool is the best illustration of a selfish life. The pool receiving the surface water from the sloping sides around it, and giving forth nothing, at last becomes the center of disease and death.

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There is nothing more repulsive than a stagnant pool, except the selfish life which it so properly represents.

The spring, on the contrary, pours forth its continuing flood of that which refreshes and invigorates. There is nothing more inspiring than a spring, except a human life built upon the plan of a spring.

And why is a spring a spring? Because it is connected with a reservoir which is higher than itself; it is the means through which water from above finds an outlet. And what has Christ done by His coming? He has connected man with the Heavenly Father, so that the goodness of God may flow out through him to a waiting world. This is what Christ has done for multitudes and what He can do for all. He can

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take the frailest, weakest mortal and, by bringing him into living contact with the source of life and light and power, make him an important factor in the world's work.

If we measure man in units of horse power he is not as strong as some of the beasts about him. If we measure him in units of intellectual power we soon find his limitations: but when we measure him in units of spiritual power there is no arithmetic which can compute his possibilities. When a boy I used to read how wicked cities might have been saved by a few righteous men; I can understand it better now. Cities can be saved to-day, and countries as well, by the spiritual power which begins with a few and spreads until the whole body politic is aroused. It is only when we

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understand the spiritual power of man that we comprehend the lines of the song :

“ I know of a land that is sunk in shame,
Of hearts that faint and tire,
But I know a Name, a Name, a Name,
That can set that land on fire.”

The great need of the world to-day is the spiritual power necessary for the overthrow of evil, for the establishment of righteousness and for the ushering in of the era of perpetual peace ; and that spiritual power begins in the surrender of the individual to God. It commences with obedience to the first commandment. I am glad to press upon your consideration the commandment :—
“Thou shalt have no other gods before Me ;”—or, as Christ phrased it, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God

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with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind." "This is the first and great commandment." When one obeys this commandment, he is in position to understand and obey the second, "which is like unto it"—"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." He who obeys the two will be neither barren nor unfruitful.

